

Early Childhood Education: Babies Are Everybody's Business

By Kitt Cox



Managing resources during the fiscal fiasco we are enduring requires new ways to arrive at a sound economic development strategy. For a growing number of professionals and policy makers in the United States, this new plan takes the form of developmental parenting classes, affordable family-based child care, and access to preschool classrooms staffed by professional educators.

A movement is building that favors creating a national network of high-quality early education and care systems that begin at birth. It makes sense. Promoting positive early learning experiences, healthy caregivers, and a con-

nnection between families and community resources can reverse rising rates of expulsion, high school dropouts, and the need for many special-education services—and can save money.

Those touting the investments in such systems point to positive outcomes for workforce development, worker productivity, graduation, and crime prevention. One study of early childhood development programs revealed that those early education investments yielded \$8 for every \$1 invested (Rolnick and Grunewald 2003). The authors conclude, "This return is too good to pass up, not only for the children but also for the taxpayers."

Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman evaluated the scientific basis for economic policy development and early education. He cites the importance of supporting babies and their families at the earliest opportunity. “Learning starts at infancy. . . . The most economically efficient way to remediate the disadvantage caused by adverse family environments is to invest in children when they are young” (Meisels 2006).

As Heckman points out, access to early support is crucial to alleviating the *toxic stress* that weighs especially heavy on financially disadvantaged families. As is frequently noted, a child’s educational readiness is a predictor of not only how the child will fare as an adult but also of our collective capacity for economic development and global competitiveness.

In a March 13, 2009, *Boston Globe* article, Kathleen McCartney, dean and professor of early childhood development at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, comments on “the mounting evidence that early education matters more for children with less.”

Speaking before an audience in Macomb, Michigan, Bill Millet, president of the economic development consulting firm Scope View Strategic Advantage, said: “Business needs to be on board in a real way. We’re not talking about the ABCs of education; we’re talking about the return on the investment. Building strong preschool programs is a far better tactic to boost the economy and boost jobs than territorially competitive incentive packages, in which states and local governments invest billions each year despite their frequent negative returns” (Searight 2009).

Writing an opinion piece for *The Hill*, Representative George Miller (D-CA), chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee, argues:

Using ARRA Funds to Improve Results for All Students

In using ARRA funds, districts should consider strategies consistent with ARRA’s reform goals and the evidence on improving student outcomes. For example,

Extend learning time for students. Expand after-school and summer learning programs for two years in conjunction with existing community providers to provide more time for learning, including opportunities for service, internships, the arts, and other activities that enrich the curriculum and address the specific needs of low-performing students.

Strengthen preparation for college and careers. Offer dual enrollment courses and student internships and train school staff to help students understand college and career options, provide effective guidance, and create a college-going culture.

For years our country was slow to recognize and address the needs of our youngest citizens, perhaps because until recently clear scientific evidence about brain development and early childhood was lacking. But it’s no longer a question that we need effective early childhood programs, built on sound policies that place adequate focus and emphasis on supporting the developing brain of children from birth through age 5. We need policies that improve teacher quality, raise standards, and support our youngest children’s learning and growth. This can be accomplished with bold initiatives and real investment and must be taken seriously. We can no longer afford the status quo. (Miller 2009)

There is growing national political will to improve early education in America. Newly elected president Barack Obama is championing early education investment as a key to economic recovery, growth, and sustainability.

References

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Use technology to improve teaching and learning.

Purchase instructional software and interactive technologies that have proven to be effective aids for instruction, particularly for English language learners, students with disabilities, and struggling and advanced learners, and train teachers to use them.

Modernize school facilities. Modernize schools to be open to the community, accessible, and energy efficient, and to have up-to-date science labs and technology that enhance learning.

Conduct reviews, demonstrations, and evaluations that enhance effectiveness. Systematically review the district’s central operations and budget to identify opportunities for reallocating resources to better support district priorities.

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